

Knowing Isn't the Problem (James 1:16-27)

For many of us the Bible is a bit of mystery, challenging us to try and understand the truths it holds. Many of its passages are strange, unfamiliar, and in need of explanation – that's why we have preachers! But James is different. James is full of obvious truths that we already know. "Every good gift is from heaven (vs17)," "be swift to listen, slow to speak, (vs19)," "lay aside filthiness and wickedness, (vs21)" "be doers of the word and not hearers only (vs22)." That sounds like what my mother used say. "Pick up your room, be considerate of your brother, don't chew with your mouth open.... If the whole Bible was like the book of James, you wouldn't need preachers. Why do you need a preacher to remind you of what you already know?

Bryan Findlayson says in this text James provides us "with two basic but urgent pieces of advice." The first is in vs. 19, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." James gets right to the point and it is good advice. He reminds us that anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. He is not saying that we can't be angry; I am not sure we are capable of not being angry. We can express our anger to others; we just have to think how to do that in a way that is desirable to God.

When I was younger I used to have a pretty hot temper - you are free to ask my family members next time they are visiting. It didn't take much to set me off, and for some reason my brothers really knew how to push my buttons - especially one, but we won't name any names. My brother JOHN, liked to flick my ear. He would do it over and over until my face was beet red with anger and then I would jump on him, thinking I was Sugar Ray Leonard, and do more than just flick him in the ear. I am sure I used some special vocabulary that I obviously learned from my brother. The result usually didn't turn out too well for me, until several years later when I was bigger, but that's not the point. Jumping on my brother and swinging like Sugar Ray is how I knew to express my anger. As I began to get older I knew lashing out like that wasn't appropriate behavior. My parents obviously helped with this and I think they heard James' advice.

I doubt many of you had a temper quite like mine. But, I am sure we've all said something to someone out of anger, and later regretted what we said. We have all heard the saying "think before you speak." James' point is clear and easy to understand, but it's not always easy to do. "Be slow to speak, slow to become angry, and accept the word planted in you."(19 & 21)

The second piece of advice that Findlayson points out is in verse 22, "Do not merely listen to the word." The word which James is referring to is the Word of love that Christ shared with us, the word he showed us, taught to us, and that he lived. It is the Good News of the Gospel. Maybe we need to look closely at what James is saying. We listen to the word and know what the Gospel says, but knowing is not the problem. The problem is DOING. Even though we know what to do, doing what the Bible says isn't always easy.

At this time of year when summer break is coming to a close and the fall session for school is beginning we can't help but think about the teachers and students and all the learning that is taking place. William Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke University, said in a chapel service, "around here, in the university, we are mostly into knowing.

Knowledge, that's our game." Knowledge is what schools and universities do. From elementary school through college, maybe onto a masters, we learn all this stuff, we gain all of this knowledge, but what do we do with it? What good is all of this knowledge if you don't do anything with it? When it comes to our faith, our religion, what we know is important because what we know helps us to form our identity as Christians. So, having knowledge of our faith, having Biblical knowledge helps shapes us. What we know shapes who we are.

I am sure all of you have seen or are familiar with the Disney movie the "Lion King." The main character in the movie is a lion named Simba. When Simba was just a cub his father Mufasa, who was the king, was murdered. As Simba grew up and became a young adult, he began to forget who he was. He began to take on the values of those around him, meercats and warthogs, and not the values of a child of a king. Later on in the story the old wise monkey, Rafiki, shows up. Rafiki asked Simba a critical question, "Do you know who you are?" Simba's answer is, "Well, I used to know, but somehow I've kind of forgotten." Rafiki looked at Simba and said, "You are the son of Mufasa, the King!" Simba replied, "My father has died." Rafiki laughing said, "Your father's not dead, he's very much alive. Come and I will show you!" So Simba ran after Rafiki to a pond. Rafiki said, "Look!" And Simba looked into the water and said, "That's not my father. It's my reflection." And the wise monkey said, "No, you're wrong. Look more deeply. Look, remember who you are!" As he looked, he began to hear his father's voice. "Simba, you have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are, so you have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you've become. You're more than the environment around you. You must take your place in the circle of life!" Mufasa said, "Remember who you are." Then Simba said, "Oh how can I go back? I am not who I used to be." And Mufasa replied, "Remember who you are. You are my son. The one true King. Remember who you are."

Simba had forgotten who he was, just like James' analogy of the person who looks in the mirror and as soon as they walk away, they forget what they look like.

Remember who you are, children of God, followers of Christ. We know Jesus' teachings. We know what the Gospels says. We know that the disciples called Jesus Teacher most of the time because that's what he did, he taught them. Yet, Jesus was doing more than just filling their minds with knowledge. From the very beginning Jesus said "Follow Me," he wanted discipleship. We know what the word is but we have to remember to do it.

When we read scripture we tend to reflect on it and ask, "How could that happen?" Or, "Let me think about that." We don't read scripture to just understand it. Scripture is to be put into action we are to follow. That's why we step back, think, reflect, on scripture because the Bible longs for us to get moving and do what it says and not just speak or hear it. William Willimon claims that James is telling us that "hearing, knowing what to do, is not as important as doing what you know to do." Maybe that's why we need to look at what James is saying because knowing doesn't seem to be the problem. The problem is DOING!

Have you ever heard a person refer to church as a filling station? They say "I think of church as a filling station. I come here empty, and during the worship service I get filled so I can make it through the week." That's not a bad way to see

Sunday morning worship, but that's passive and not active. There is something about us which thinks that all worship is about is sitting, listening, and taking in.

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves." James associates not putting the word into action to lying. Once we have heard the songs, the prayers, the sermon, and the scriptures we deceive ourselves into thinking that we have done the faith, we are being religious when we have merely listened, reflected, pondered, and agreed. There are some individuals who believe that their biblical knowledge somehow makes them people of faith and makes them religious. But they have not embodied these beliefs, acted them out so they can be real.

A good worship service is more than just listening, reflecting, pondering, and agreeing. What goes on within these four walls, what we do during worship, what's done here, and how many people are sitting in the pews does not determine if this is a good church. A good church is determined by what is going on outside the walls throughout the week; it is what the gospel produces.

Do we look like the God we sing our praises to? Have our songs and prayers transformed us, made us into what we profess? James tells us, that is the test.

James is reminding us that we know how to be religious, we know what the gospel says, we know we are followers of Christ. Maybe we do need to be reminded of what we already know. We know that we have to put our faith into action and James tells us we have to look after the orphans and widows, we have to care for and serve our brothers and sisters. We have to be doers of the word.

The test to determine if this was a good sermon, a good worship service is now in front of us. We have heard the sermon, we understand the text from James and we know what it says. But knowing is not the problem. What will we do with what we have said, sung, and heard?

"Pastor, that was a fantastic sermon," a parishioner said after the service. "Oh that remains to be seen," the preacher said.